

Music

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In order to understand properly the Maltese cultural background, one must be aware of the historical associations the island passed through over the centuries and which, in some way or other, left their mark on the Maltese way of life, socially and, at a tangent, also culturally.

Although written evidence about musical activity in Malta throws us back less than four centuries (that is around the year 1600), I think that one can safely assume that these practices have had their roots in the misty dawns of prehistory. When one remembers that archaeological research has placed some of Malta's ancient stone temples as anteceding even the pyramids of Egypt, one can then easily surmise how far back in time this line can stretch.

The Mediterranean region has often been referred to as the cradle of civilization and Malta, being right in the centre of this area, could never escape or be immune to the cauldron of political and cultural upheavals that from time immemorial successively engulfed this region as nation after nation, dynasty after dynasty, creed after creed battled it out for supremacy and assertion. In fact, Malta's geographical position plus an inherent helplessness in its defensive potential due to its size, pre-ordained a pattern of events that can be monotonously traced from the time of the Phoenicians to the tragic days of the second world war – whichever nation or religious faction held the sway of military power along the Mediterranean littoral dominated this small island. In the fashion of the classic Roman dictum "*Veni, Vidi, Vici*", they came, they saw and they conquered, and some of them even stayed for hundreds of years.

It is in the light of the above that one

has to look in order to understand Malta's cultural heritage and to a great extent its musical traditions. History shows us that cult and music-making were not only complimentary but almost inseparable partners. It is, then, not that difficult to imagine that at some point in time in this island of temple worshippers one could hear the pervasive rhythms of the sacrificial drums of the Neolithic peoples in their massive stone temples, the rippling fresh sounds of the Greek lyre, the martial fanfares of the Romans or the mystic chants of the Byzantines and the Arabs.

The year 870 A.D. marks the scene of active history by the advent of a new Mediterranean power which for long had challenged European civilization. F.W. Ryan in his book *Malta* writes that:

"the Arabs inspired by Mohammed roused themselves from their leisured life as mere tent-dwellers in Arabia, and poured in vast numbers out of their country, with the fury of fanatics, carrying their new religion abroad at the point of the sword. They swept westward through Syria, Palestine and North Africa to Spain and also took possession of Malta".

Thus, the authority of the Byzantine Emperor, Basil I, was declared at an end and the government was assumed by an Arab Emir. It is a curious fact that despite a physical presence on the Island lasting about four centuries, apart from the spoken language, practically nothing is left of the Arab cultural heritage whether this be archaeological, architectural or musical.

When Count Roger of Hauteville wrested the island from the hands of the Arabs, Malta became a feudal fief until the year 1530 and as such was successively subject to the many different holders of the Sicilian crown, namely the Normans, the Hohenstaufens, the Kings of Anjou, of

Aragon and of Castille.

From Count Roger's time onwards one can safely say that Malta always looked towards Europe for its cultural inspirations and models.

In his book *Musica e Musicisti a Malta*, Livorno, 1932, Ulderico Rolandi, without however quoting his sources writes: "I have come across here and there names of various cantors, precentors etc who from time immemorial were active in the churches of Malta". He goes on to make a list of some of these, mentioning, for example, *Guido Anselmi, Cantor* in the year 1112; *Magister Philippus, Cantor Tripolitanus* in the year 1124; *Raimondus Provincialis, praecentor* in the year 1170; *Rainaldus, Cantor Tiberiadis* in the year 1174; *Joannes, Praecentor acconiensis* in the year 1200; and *Willelmus, Cantor vallaniensis* in the year 1234. This information attests most vividly not only to a healthy musical life in Malta at such an early age, but is also indicative of an artistic phenomenon valid for most of the successive centuries, namely the musical ties Malta has had on an international level, especially with Italy. Another important point that emerges from Rolandi's writing and which ties closely with the phenomenon just mentioned is the fact that Malta, during this period, not only "imported" musicians, but also had its fair share of "exporting" them. One finds, for example, mention of *Don Luca Vella, Cantore Maltese* and *Giovanni Isconfort, Maltese* who, in 1550, were employed with Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, and the Papal Cappella in Rome respectively.

The first ever known poem written in Maltese belongs to the middle of the 15th century. It is a most interesting and important "*Cantilena*" penned by Pietro Caxaru, discovered in 1966 by Prof. G. Wettinger and Fr Mikiel Fsadni. The structure and rhythm of the poem strongly suggest that it could have been sung, although no hard evidence in this direction is extant. However, the poem could

perhaps fit the style of a particular genre of Maltese music, namely the "*Ghana*".

"*Ghana*" is the major expression (and in many reasons one can say the only expression) of the Maltese folk musical tradition in spite of the fact that the main interest of the "*Ghana*" lies more in its literary rather than its musical aspect.

In the field of "*Ghana*" singing, one comes across a few melodies, (or better still melodic forms) which serve the "*ghannej*" (singer of "*ghana*") as a vehicle on which to improvise his verses or else to relate in verse form a pre-established story from the folk literature tradition. As one can easily note, in both cases the musical element is always secondary to the text.

"*Ghana*" is invariably sung to an accompaniment of guitars which serve a dual purpose. One is to provide a harmonic basis for the melodic line, and the other is to play interludes between the many verses to give the singer both a period of rest and a short time to think and formulate his next stanza. The played interludes are of an improvisatory nature using the main melodic line as a basis.

The fact that in "*ghana*" we find limited use of melodic intervals smaller than the semitone has led some people to associate its roots with North Africa where monomelodic variations and micro-tonal intervals are an integral part of the musical culture. Personally, I am of the opinion that the spiritual roots of "*ghana*" are to be found in the south of Spain, and that they reached our shores via Sicily. If one listens to traditional singing from these places, one can easily associate similarities of construction and performance with Maltese "*ghana*". The traditional use of guitars as accompanying instruments is, I feel, a very strong relevant detail in this regard.

Other instruments belonging to our folk musical tradition (some of which are, unfortunately, well on the way to extinction) are the "*fifra*" (reed pipe) and the "*tamburell*" (tambour). A variant of the "*tamburell*" was the "*tamburin*"

(tambourine). Another popular percussion instrument was the “*Rabbaba*” also known as the “*Žuvzafa*” (friction drum).

The “*bronja*” and the “*qrajna*” were two primitive, folk instruments. The “*bronja*” (sea-shell trumpet) and the “*qrajna*” (bull’s horn trumpet) are well on the way out to disappear completely from the local scene. Malta too had its variant of the Pipes of Pan, locally called “*flejguta*” and “*bedbud*”.

In all the above there are very few things that can be called purely indigenous. As regards “folk instruments”, Malta shared most of these with other countries found along the Mediterranean littoral.

However, from this aspect one could make a special reference to the Maltese bagpipe “*zaqq*”. Of all the varieties of bagpipe found all over the world, the Maltese bagpipe seems to be the only one made of an inflated dog’s skin, which is held under the left arm with the dog’s legs directed upward. There is also a mouthpiece through which the skin is filled with air and a holed reed which produced the required notes.

In the *Galpin Society Journal* published in the UK in 1977, J.F. Partridge and F. Jeal discuss the bagpipe of Malta from a musical, sociological and ethnological point of view and they maintain that it seems to have little affinity to the Italian “*zampogna*” or the Sicilian “*cornamusa*” (traditional sources of influence). Rather, they point to an Aegean influence.

The peculiarity of the Maltese bagpipe is that unlike most others it still looks alarmingly like the animal from which it is made. In this respect it has also some resemblance to the “*zakra*” (Turkish bagpipe).

When the Knights of St John arrived on the island in 1530, Malta saw the blossoming of a truly artistic renaissance. Since the Knights represented a very valid cross-section of all the noble houses of Europe, from England to France, to Spain, to Italy, to Germany, it is not surprising that their presence gave the necessary

impetus for a wave of cultural experiences hitherto unknown on the island.

However, as events began to take their course, for its culture Malta started to look more and more closely towards Italian ideals and practices. I am inclined to think that there were two reasons for this state of affairs – one was the geographical proximity which made actual physical contact easier than that with any other nation: the other was the influence of the Catholic Church which for its spiritual and artistic inspiration obviously looked towards Rome. From this time onwards, a lot of details about musical practice in Malta started to be documented, and thus one can trace this phenomenon emerging slowly but very clearly.

We know that by the end of the 16th Century there were two established “*cappellas*” on the island – the one at St John’s in Valletta, the seat of the Grandmaster and the one in Mdina, the seat of the Bishop.

Each centre had its group of singers and musicians in order to provide the music during the various types of divine services like matins, masses and vespers. During this time, services were far more numerous and far longer than the ones we find today in the ecclesiastical calendar, and this provided ample scope for the full-time employment of singers and instrumentalists.

Both these centres provided an ideal breeding ground for talented musicians and singers. In them, there was so much scope for music-making, and when one remembers that music, then, was written not for an ideal audience or for posterity as happens nowadays, but for pure everyday consumption, one realizes that talented composers had to churn out new compositions practically every day, all to the benefit of the members of the particular “*cappella*”, singers and musicians.

This was the type of music centre that gave us G.P. da Palestrina (1525-1594) in Italy, William Byrd (1542-1623) in England, T.L. de

Victoria (1594-1611) in Spain and Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594) in the Netherlands and later on Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) and Antonio Vivaldi (1676-1741) from St Mark's in Venice, Henry Purcell (1658-1695) from the Chapel Royal in London and later still J.S. Bach (1685-1750) from St Thomas's church in Leipzig.

The two above mentioned nuclei of religious musical culture in Malta were soon vying with each other for artistic excellence. At first, Italian vocalists and instrumentalists were imported by both the Bishop and the Grandmaster to give their services in the respective "*cappellas*". Because of the existing rivalry, they obviously always aimed at the very best. This factor raised the tone and standard of local music-making to a high degree in a very short time and Malta could then be very well considered as just another centre of Italian musical culture like Palermo, Naples, Rome or Venice.

After a short time, talented young Maltese musicians were sent over to Italy to study at one of the established centres, mostly in Palermo and Naples, where, after spending a few years in apprenticeship they were expected to return to Malta to practice their art.

A very positive step happened during the middle of the 17th century, when the post of organist at Mdina Cathedral was elevated to the one of chapel master ("*maestro di cappella*") with specific tasks and functions tied to the post, like composing, teaching the organ and training singers. By the end of the century, musical creativity and interpretation had reached the high standards of any typical "*cappella*" on the continent.

Manuscripts and old music books found in the Archives of the Cathedral museum in Mdina attest to the close ties that seem to have been forged between Malta and the better known "*cappellas*" in Italy since most of the great composers from these "*cappellas*" are represented in this collection. The fact that their works are

mostly found in hand written anthologies would seem to imply that they were very much in common usage. Some of the big names that were being played in Malta at that time are Ludovico Grossi da Viadana (1564-1645), Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), Virgilio Mazzocchi (1597-1646), Bonifacio Graziani (1604-1665), Giacomo Carissimi (1604-1674), Gian Battista Vitali (1644-1692), Gesualdo Principe di Venosa (1560-1613) and Francesco Durante (1684-1755).

These were the trail blazers who beat a distinctive path not only in their native Italy but who influenced the course of music history all over Europe – Carissimi with his Oratorios, Monteverdi with his Operas, da Viadana with his Basso Continuo and Gesualdo with his Madrigal.

As regards secular music in Malta, recent research by G. Wettinger and M. Fsadni has shown that references to this type of activity can be traced as far back as 1419 when nine "*juculari*" (musicians) were employed in the militia at Mdina (see *L-Ghanja ta' Pietru Caxaru* p.35). They also note that the authorities in Mdina used to employ musicians to play during the processions of the principal feasts of the town (not unlike modern practice, one may add). Rather more interesting is their reference to a notorial act of 1467 wherein it is stated that two persons by the name of Pietru Muscatu and Mikiel Galdes teamed up to provide musical entertainment during wedding feasts. Also, at about this time, a certain Andreotta de Bisconis used to walk round the streets of Gozo with a group of young men "*cantare e dicere cantilenas alta voce*". The authors suggest that de Bisconis may have been improvising his cantilenas in the manner of the type of "*Ghana*" known as "*spirtu pront*".

The Italian influence, already referred to as regards Maltese sacred music of the 16th and 17th centuries, can also be traced to secular compositions. As early as 1650, we come across a libretto for an opera with the title *Dafnè, ovvero La Vergine*

Trionfante by Enrico Magi. Magi was born in Valletta on the 4th of December 1630. This libretto was dedicated to Fra Salvatore Imbroll, Prior of the Order (See MS 775, National Library, Valletta).

Unfortunately, no written evidence is extant as to who may have put this text to music or even whether this opera was ever performed in public at all. However, the fact that as early as 1650 we can come across material with connections, (even if at a tangent), to operatic activity shows that in this field Maltese music was not lagging far behind musical events happening on the continent.

Experiments in the birth of opera as a new artistic form of musical expression had started just after the turn of the century in Florence. What has come to be historically known as the Florentine Camerata (a group of people which included such “*litterati*” like Count Giovanni Bardi and Count Corsi and musicians like Vincenzo Galilei (1533c-1591), Giulio Caccini (1546-1618) and Jacopo Peri (1561-1633)) was responsible for the first early crude attempts at opera production.

The Camerata claimed that the music of the 16th century with its diverse contrapuntal devices had literally torn the poetry to pieces (*laceramenti della poesia*). They wanted to do away with all this pedantry and aspired to translate the sense of an entire passage rather than that of a single word into music. Thus, the first attempts at “*recitativo*” were achieved. While the old intermezzo juxtaposed drama and music, the new ideals tried to blend them together as a drama in music, hence “*dramma in musica*”.

Ottavio Rinuccini (1550-1621) fashioned his first libretto after the model of the traditional pastoral intermezzo and not by accident do several early operas carry the subtitle of *favola pastorale*. Not by accident either is the fact that Enrico Magi’s *Dafnè* written in Valletta in 1650 carries the subtitle of *favola Boschereccia*.

Ulderico Rolandi in his *Musica e Musicisti a Malta* records that in 1664 an

opera by the name of *Annibale in Capua* was performed in Valletta. The authorship of the music is doubtful. In fact, Rolandi attributes the music to the Venetian composer Antonio Ziani (brother of Marc Antonio) while well-known historian Fr John Azzopardi maintains that the music of *Annibale in Capua* was composed by Vincenzo Tozzi, a Sicilian composer.

It could however, very well be that both Ziani and Tozzi set to music a libretto by the name of *Annibale in Capua*. It is well worth the while here to remember that Baroque practice found nothing wrong or ethically wanting to have the same libretto set to music by different composers (witness the libretti of Pietro Anastasio (1698-1782), some of whose operatic texts were set to music by about thirty different composers with the result that the words of his texts were known in advance almost by heart by regular operatic audiences the way church-goers know their book of prayers).

Towards the end of the century this Italian operatic influence started to take deep root with the result that in 1732 Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena felt the need to build a public theatre in which this new type of music diversion could be produced. The Manoel Theatre is a jewel of our historical/cultural heritage and its date of construction makes it one of the oldest public theatres in Europe. What is even more precious is the fact that it is still functioning the way it was intended to over two hundred and fifty years ago.

After tracing Italian musical influences in Malta during the 17th and 18th centuries, one can perhaps proceed to highlight the effects that these had on the local product, as it were.

The oldest extant musical composition by a Maltese composer dates back to 1652. It belongs to the Cathedral Archives in Mdina and the composer is Giuseppe Balzano who was born in Valletta on September 19th 1616. Ordained priest in 1640, he first served in the church of St Paul’s Shipwreck. Twenty one years had to pass before he was finally appointed “*maestro di cappella*” at

the cathedral in Mdina, a post he held on and off until his retirement in 1699.

The composition referred to is a motet for two tenors, bass and continuo, entitled *Beatus Vir*. This non-liturgical piece falls into two main sections, the first of which mainly involves the Bass solo. The “*stile rappresentativo*” of the early Italian Baroque style stemming from the Florentine ideals already referred to are very evident here. Mostly, the music makes use of one note per syllable, breaking off into melismatic flourishes on some of the more important words. The second section beginning on “*Cantemus Ergo*” is a rhythmic triple meter piece where a lot of use is made of imitative counterpoint. The last few bars, in quadruple measure, form a kind of Coda where the three voices are brought together for the final cadence.

Unfortunately this is the only known signed complete composition by Giuseppe Balzano. But luckily for us in the Cathedral archives one can also find a contemporary musical repertory which includes the works of Giuseppe Balzano extant there at the time of its compilation. It lists an impressive catalogue of 18 masses, 70 vespers, 36 hymns and 51 motets.

In her dissertation, *Scores Attributed to Giuseppe Balzano*, 1991, Ms Natascha Chircop sets out to trace some of the lost works by Giuseppe Balzano from a number of anonymous compositions still extant in the archives. As Fr John Azzopardi writes in the preface

“an examination of the works listed under Giuseppe Balzano in the old repertory and the group of anonymous scores available today reveals several titles of non-liturgical motets that are common to both, not only as regards the actual title but also as regards details of voices and instruments employed e.g. ‘*a tre voci con sinfonia*’. These coincidences lead us to suspect that some works by Giuseppe Balzano, Malta’s oldest composer with an extant score and some fragments, may still have more compositions which are not signed but are preserved among our anonymous works”.

From this critical study, Ms Chircop attributes another seven extant but

unsigned compositions to Giuseppe Balzano, namely the cantatas “*Det Tuba*” (MS 152), and “*Ego Ille*” (MS 161), the motets “*Da Pacem Domine*” (MS 159), “*Ecce Servum Dei*” (MS 163), “*Quis Est Hic*” (MS 186) and the hymns “*Te Splendor Et Virtus*” (MS 205) and “*Jesu Redemptor Omnium*” (MS 208).

The next oldest extant signed work is the motet “*Venite Omnes*” scored for Cantus and Altus with continuo dated 1680. It is the work of Domenico Balzano (1632-1707), Giuseppe’s younger brother and like him a priest and “*musico salariato*” at St John’s, at St Paul’s Shipwreck and finally as “*maestro di cappella*” in Mdina.

The dates of these two extant compositions (1652 and 1680) attest to the long line of Maltese compositional activity which until a few years ago was hardly ever thought to extend beyond the works of the well-known Nicolò Isouard.

Aloysio Mataron is another name recently come to light. He was active during the middle of the 17th Century and was the son of a French father (Jacobus Mataron) and Maltese mother (Aloysia Ghimes). There are only two works of his known namely the motets “*Dulcis Amor*” (MS 113) and “*Salve Regina*” (MS 113). The beauty of these works scored for Cantus, Altus, Tenor and continuo makes it even more desirable that someone will research the life and opus of this enigmatic figure in the history of music in Malta, about whom very little is known.

Maltese musical activity of the 18th century opens with an interesting but not so very familiar figure. Pietro Gristi (1696-1738) was born in Rabat and first served as a boy soprano in the “*cappella*” in Mdina. He was the first of a long list of Maltese musicians to be sent to Naples to complete his musical studies. Up to his time, Palermo was usually the place to go to. Financial assistance was provided by the Cathedral Chapter and, as one would expect, when in 1717 he returned to Malta

from his studies at the *Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo*, he took up the post of “*maestro di cappella*” at Mdina Cathedral. In 1720 he was ordained priest. Gristi was only 42 years old when he died in 1738.

Very few pieces by Pietro Gristi are extant and most of these can be found in the musical archives of the Collegiate Chapter of Cospicua. However, a close look at these works would seem to indicate that Gristi was an able composer who knew his job very well. His compositions are of quite an acceptable standard and of course betray the Neapolitan influence to the core.

Girolamo Abos, born in Valletta, was a musician of Spanish descent. He died in Naples. Diverse scholars give different dates for the birth and death of this very cosmopolitan musician. As regards his date of birth, Rolandi quotes the year 1706, Eric Blom (*Dictionary of Music*) the year 1719; Dulfocq the year 1708 while Trecanni and Vallardi (*Enciclopedia*) limit themselves to say that he was active during the 18th century. Rolandi, Vallardi and Dulfocq give 1786 as the year of his death, Trecanni the year 1760 and Blom the year 1769. From circumstantial evidence I would opt for the dates given by Corbet in the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, namely 1715-1760.

When Abos was still very young, he was sent to Naples to study, never to return to Malta, his birthplace, again. In fact, no archive in Malta possesses any manuscripts by this composer although his music, both printed and in manuscript form can be found in Naples, Bologna, Rome, the National Library in Vienna and the British Museum, amongst other places.

The case of Girolamo Abos represents quite clearly the musical inclination and artistic mentality of 18th century Malta. Abos was not only influenced by the Italian school, but he made it his own in such a way that for all intents and purposes he could be considered as just another Italian musician.

Like Gristi, Abos studied at the “*Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo*”, in turn teaching at the “*Pietà dei Turchini*” where, amongst his pupils, one finds the famous Paisiello (Vallardi, *Enciclopedia Moderna Illustrata*). Francesco Caruana Dingli writing in 1842 names him as also being for some time “*maestro di cappella*” in the Cathedral in Naples. In this city, Abos presented his first opera *Le Due Zingare Simili*. His career took off quite rapidly and in his capacity as composer and orchestra director he toured the length and breadth of Europe from Vienna to London. For two years (1756-1758) he was musical director of the so-called “*Italian Theatre*” in London. Abos composed many sacred works and operas, and during his lifetime was well-known in most European musical circles.

Although Mikiel Ang Vella lacked the cosmopolitan flair of Abos, all the same he represents one of the more important figures in Maltese music of the early 18th century. Like Abos, Vella was born in 1715 in Bormla where he died in 1792. Apart from his artistic activity, Vella is also remembered as being the first person to take a deep interest in starting a school of music in Malta on the same lines as those of the Conservatories in Italy. Among his students, we find some names that had a great say on the course of Maltese music later on in the century – Azopardi, Isouard, Burlò and Magrin. M.A. Vella is also historically important for his pioneering work in the field of the secular cantata. With the opening of the Manoel Theatre in 1732 this type of composition came to full bloom and was very popular with the knights and other concert goers, especially during the “*Calendimaggio*”. Before Vella, these cantatas were invariably the work of Italian composers (Giuseppe and Melchiorre Sammartini). Vella was the first Maltese to infiltrate this area of musical activity with works like *Astra e Pallade*, (1740), *La Virtù Trionfante*, (1741), *La Giustizia di Nettuno e la Religione*

Gerosolimitana, (1746) and *Gli Applausi della Fama*, (1758).

According to F.G. Fetis (1784-1871) Vella, for some time, was active in Paris (c. 1750). Whether he was there studying or working is not very clear. What we know for sure is that during his stay Vella published two trios and six quartets and his impact in Parisian circles was such that Charon and Fayolle in their *Dictionnaire Historique des Musiciennes* deemed him important enough to be included, while Fetis in his *Biographie Universelle des Musiciennes et Bibliographie Generale de la Musique* published in 1881 described M.A. Vella as being a contrapuntist of the top order.

The most important composers active in Malta round the middle of the 18th century are undoubtedly Benigno Zerafa and Francesco Azopardi. Benigno Zerafa was born in Rabat on the 25th August 1726, the fifth of eight children. At the very early age of 11, Benigno already formed part of the "*Cappella Musicale*" at the Cathedral after having been recommended by the Church Deputies for Music as being suitably qualified. He was accepted as a "*soprano*" under the directorship of Pietro Gristi. Fr John Azzopardi in his short biography of Benigno Zerafa writes:

"Benigno's service at the Cathedral was brief, for at the age of twelve, and following the premature death of the Chapel Master, Don Pietro Gristi, on the 4th of March 1738, he departed for Naples to be trained in the same institute (*Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesu Cristo*), where his master at the Cathedral had received his musical education."

A document of 1738, preserved in the *Archivio Storico Diocesano* of Naples records: "*A 8 detto (July 1738) entrato Benigno Zerafa, Maltese, posto da Sua Eminenza per alunno*". (On the 8th of July 1738 the name of Benigno Zerafa, Maltese, was registered on the recommendation of His Eminence).

In Naples, Zerafa studied with, amongst other professors, his compatriot Girolamo Abos and after a six year course returned to Malta. Abos thought highly of young

Zerafa and before the latter left Naples to return to Malta he wrote him a very good recommendation extolling the young Zerafa's abilities as a composer.

It was to be expected, then, that when Zerafa applied for the post of "*maestro di cappella*" at the Cathedral in Mdina an office which had been vacant ever since the premature death of Pietro Gristi (1738), his application was very favourably and enthusiastically received by the Church authorities, so that on the 22nd of August 1744 Bishop Alpheran

"issued a decree appointing Benigno Zerafa, aged 18, 'Maestro di Cappella' of his Cathedral, with the obligation to conduct music, teach Canto Fermo and Canto Figurato, holding at least two rehearsals every week".

(Fr John Azzopardi *ibid.*).

Although time would eventually prove Francesco Azopardi to be a more prolific composer, yet in certain musical aspects Zerafa's art was far more progressive. It shows a close familiarity with musical tendencies in pre-classical Europe and in this "*stile galante*", I find Zerafa to be more advanced than Azopardi, who was rather conservative in this respect. These characteristics of Zerafa are very evident in his orchestration, very often of a florid nature and with intricate musical figuration. His frequent use of the triplet rhythmic division, also makes him stand out among his contemporaries and immediate successors. Likewise, the formal structure of some of his arias. I have yet to meet an 18th century Maltese composition as truly "*rococco*" in style as Zerafa's "*Nisi Dominus*" of 1764 originally scored "*a voce sola con violini, stromenti di fiato e mandolino obbligato*" with, of course, continuo. Notice also the unusual but interesting use of the mandolino as an obbligato instrument.

Fortunately, the majority of Zerafa's compositions, (which include quite a number of psalms, masses, antiphons, motets etc.), are still extant because through a notorial act of the 7th February 1787, he bequeathed all his works to the Cathedral.

Francesco Azopardi (1748-1809) by nature was of a more cosmopolitan inclination than his older contemporary Benigno Zerafa. Azopardi had begun his musical studies with M.A. Vella. But like Zerafa, he soon found his way to Naples to study at the Conservatorio of "San Onofrio". His teacher here was none other than the famous Nicolo Piccini (1728-1800) who during the late 1770's features so notoriously as C.W. Gluck's (1714-1787) rival in the Parisian "*Guerre des Buffons*". After finishing his studies in Naples Azopardi stayed on for about another four years working very successfully along, and sometimes in competition with, famous composers like Tommaso Traetta (1727-1779) and Piccini himself.

This artistic success by a Maltese composer in such a famous city could not but attract the attention of interested parties in Malta, not least the Cathedral authorities in Mdina. As early as 1772, the Chapter had already hinted to Azopardi that he would be very favourably considered as their next "*maestro di cappella*" if he had so desired. However, another two years had to pass before Azopardi could finally be persuaded to return to his homeland to be given his appointment in Mdina in 1774.

To commemorate this occasion (and also, no doubt, to introduce himself with a bang to the Maltese music loving authorities and general public) he composed what is perhaps one of his major works, namely the Mass in G major for two separate four-part choirs, soloists and orchestra. This great mass was performed with huge success in 1775.

Azopardi's vast opus includes many important and prestigious works like for example the two masses of 1776 and 1798, both structured on the style of the "*Messa in Sol*" already mentioned. Besides, we find scores of psalms, antiphons, hymns and the like. One of his reputedly greatest creations, the oratorio "*La Passione di Cristo*" is unfortunately untraceable

and what we know about it comes to us from contemporary reviews and mentions. The text of this oratorio was written by none other than the famous Metastasio.

It is a curious fact, however, that though most of his sacred compositions are extant and readily available in several local musical archives (mostly in Mdina), his secular works are very hard to come by. Suffice it to mention that although the archives in Mdina are so rich as regards Azopardi's church music, there are only three secular works of his on their catalogue, namely, three sinfonie (overtures), two of which are "*con oboe obbligato*".

No less important were Azopardi's other activities, both as a theoretician and as a teacher. His musical treatise *Il Musico Prattico* dedicated to Vincenzo Vergoda y Ribera, was a great success when it was first published in Italy and later on in France, where it was translated and put on the market in 1786 by the Belgian Framery. Eventually, *Il Musico Prattico* found its way even to the exalted aulae of the conservatoire in Paris after it was approved by Andre Gretry. Gretry opined that "*l'opera era l'unica nella quale eccellenti esempi, e scritti bene in musica, sono congiunti alla teoria ordinaria degli accordi*". (The only work where excellent, well-written musical examples are quoted against theoretical statements and harmonic rules). Even the great Cherubini, whose influence shadowed even such a colossus like Beethoven, thought very highly of Azopardi. This, to the point where in his treatise on counterpoint, he saw fit to include excerpts from *Il Musico Prattico* as exemplary elucidations.

In 1774 Azopardi published another didactic book, the manuscript of which is preserved in the Archives in Mdina, "*Origine della Regola della Musica nella Storia del suo Progresso, Decadenza e Rinnovazione*". Here Azopardi challenges the theories expounded by a certain Antonio Eximio in his book *Sull'Origine*

della Musica published in Rome, which because of its destructive philosophy had been described by the Italians as “*un bizzarro romanzo di musica*” (a bizarre tale of music).

Like Azopardi, both Salvatore Magrin (1770-1848) and Giuseppe Burlò (1772-1856) started their musical studies with M.A. Vella in his school at Bormla (Cospicua). Magrin and Burlò did not measure up to the stature of their two immediate forerunners – Zerafa and Azopardi. Yet, they have endowed and enriched our national musical patrimony with quite a few worthy musical compositions, mostly of a sacred nature.

Salvatore Magrin, after his initial studies with Azopardi went to Naples to finish his training and when he returned to Malta he was immediately appointed “*maestro di cappella*” at Bormla. Apparently, for some reason, Giuseppe Burlò failed to emulate the contemporary custom of proceeding to Palermo or Naples to round up his musical studies. These were limited to courses in Malta, especially with Azopardi, as already indicated. However, rather than the composer, a work of his seems to have eventually found its way there! P.P. Castagna in his *Malta bil-Gżejjer Tagħha* maintains that Burlò’s treatise *Memoria sul Contrapunto* was used for didactic purposes at the Conservatorio in Naples.

One of the giants of Maltese musical history is undoubtedly Nicolò Isouard. His exact date of birth has been the subject of controversy for some time. Until a few years ago, the year 1775 was held to be Isouard’s date of birth (Castagna, Rolandi, Trecanni, Larouse and the Oxford Companion to Music). Dominic Cutajar’s recent research seems to have settled the issue and pins the date to the 17th of May 1773.

Isouard was the composer who towards the end of the 18th century made Malta known to all European musical circles, especially since he preferred to be referred to as Nicolò de Malthe. This despite the fact that like the Italian Giovanni Battista

Lulli (Jean Baptiste Lully 1632-1687) before him he practically lost his national identity and became totally imbued with the manner and style of his adoptive Paris. This loss however, was more on a social rather than artistic level.

Isouard had begun his studies in Malta and it was only to be expected that he would be sent to Naples to finish his schooling. Here, at a very tender age, he began to make a name for himself, especially with the production of his first opera *L’Avviso ai Maritati* (1794, in Florence) which proved to be an immense success. Shortly afterwards De Rohan called him back to Malta to occupy the post of “*maestro di cappella*” at St John’s Cathedral in Valletta.

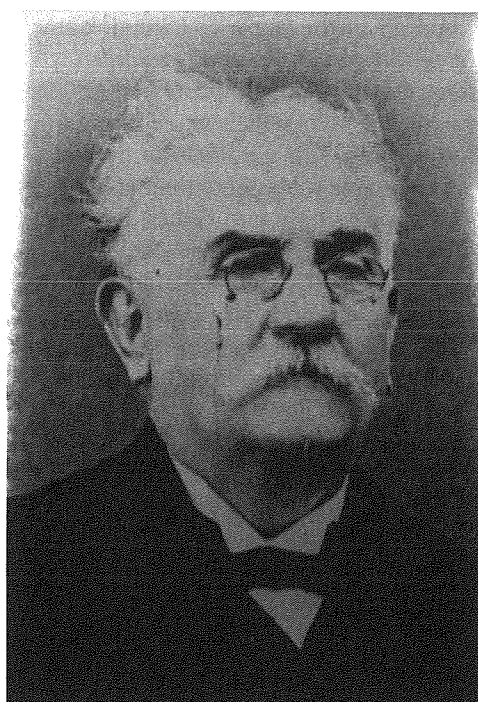
Isouard was a great Francophile and when the French were forced to end their two-year occupation of the Island 1798-1800, he decided to leave Malta and settle in Paris, never to return to his homeland again.

From the middle of the 17th century to the end of the 18th, European music was largely dominated by the Italian style in such a way that this type of music served as a “*lingua franca*” all over the continent. Where this style did not completely absorb local musical customs as had happened in London, St Petersburg and obviously Malta, it co-existed with the local style, but in a state of great rivalry (France and Germany). In France, the rivalry between the two factors was great indeed.

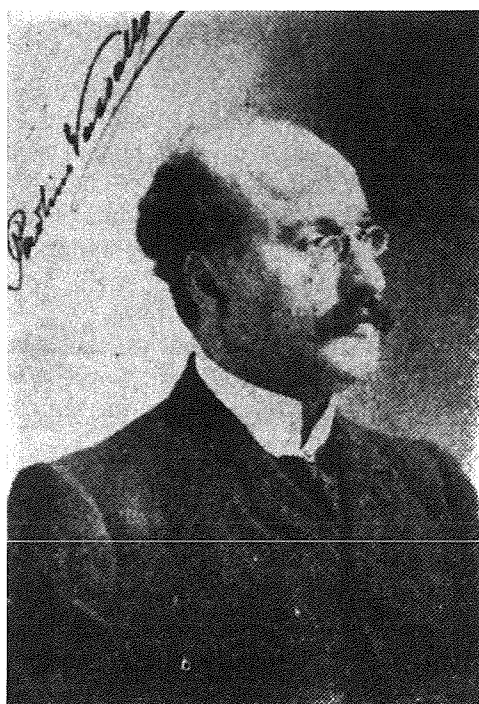
The “*Guerre des Buffons*” had started in the time of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1728) and reached its climax round about the year 1780 when Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) was “imported” from Germany to champion the French cause (*Tragedie Lyrique*). The rivals were not to be outdone and we find Nicolo Piccini (1728-1800) being asked from Naples to take up the cudgel on behalf of the pro-Italian faction (*Opera Comique*). This was the scene in Paris some twenty years before Isouard’s arrival and the latter, bred as he was in the



Nicolò Isouard (1773-1818)



Antonio Nani (1842-1929)



Paolino Vassallo (1856-1913)



'Dulcis Amor Jesu' by Luigi Mataron (c.1650), Archives of Cathedral Museum, Mdina.

Neapolitan school and tradition, could only end up in the camp of Piccini, namely in the world of the *Opera Comique*.

Isouard started to compose several operas in this style which made him an instant success with the Parisian public. He soon became a household name in Paris where he was simply and rather affectionately known as Nicolò or Nicolò de Malthe.

Moreover, works of his like *Jeannot et Colin*, *Joconde* and *Cendrillon* soon broke the confines of French opera houses and spread the name of Nicolò all over Europe. There is not one single library or archive where I have been (Italy, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Norway) which does not list a substantial number of works by Isouard in its catalogue.

In France, especially, his was a huge success indeed. Some detractors, however, like to point out that this popularity was won for reasons which were circumstantial rather than artistic – Cherubini had by this time become very, very old; Mehul seemed to have lost interest in composition and practically stopped his activities; Kreutzer was grossly and deeply involved only in Grand Opera; Breton had almost disappeared from the scene, while Boieldieu emigrated to Russia to work in the court at St Petersburg.

For some time, therefore, Isouard had been working in Paris almost without any competition. This ended only in 1811 when Boieldieu returned from Russia. Francois Adrien Boieldieu (1775-1834) picked up again a career in Paris which he had launched eleven years earlier (1800) with the production of his highly successful opera *The Caliph of Baghdad*. For his return, Boieldieu presented *La Dame Blanche* which again proved to be highly popular. After this success, Boieldieu's popularity began to mushroom to sweeping proportions, very often to the detriment of Nicolò Isouard's. In fact, Nicolò's biggest disappointment came at the hands of his rival Boieldieu. The latter was in fact chosen as director of the Academie in Paris, a post which Isouard had greatly

aspired to and had wanted so very badly. This incident had a telling effect on his work and health and Isouard died a year later, in 1818.

With the beginning of the 19th Century, we find in Malta three families who were to contribute greatly to the musical life of the island, both in the way of composition and performance.

The Nani family is perhaps the one with the longest roots. In fact, we know that as early as the time of Grandmaster De Rohan, a certain Angelo Nani (1751-1844) came to Malta to be employed as violinist with the Order. Angelo Nani originally hailed from Venice but seems to have found life in Malta very congenial because he settled here for good. He was a top-notch violinist and soon made a name for himself and his music. The next generation Nani was his son Emanuele (1768-1860), who not only followed his father's profession as a violinist, but was also very active as a musical director. His conducting career took him all over Europe (Palermo, Venice, Naples, London and Paris). It is probable that during the two years of the French occupation, Emanuele was not on the island. But he did return when the French left, because it was Emanuele who conducted the concert given in honour of Sir Alexander Ball at the Manoel Theatre. For this occasion, he performed one of his compositions – *Torno Febo dal Gange Festoso*, a cantata.

Dr Paolo Nani (1814-1904) was Emanuele's son. He was sent to Naples to further his musical studies and amongst his teachers we find Zingarelli and the famous Donizetti. Paolo Nani was perhaps the most prolific of the Nani line of composers with many worthy compositions to his credit. Paolo's son, Antonio Nani (1842-1929) after his initial studies in Malta, also went to Naples where he was coached in harmony and counterpoint by the Neapolitan Barbati and De Gioiosa. Back in Malta, Antonio established himself as one of the most successful and popular "*maestri di cappella*" in which capacity he

provided the music for some of Malta's major parishes. Because of his job, he had to compose several antiphons for the titular feasts, compositions which are still played today with much relish, one may add, both on the part of the performers and the listeners. The Nani family line continued with another Paolo (1906-1986), Antonio's son. Paolo studied in Rome, and in Malta he will be remembered mostly for his conducting, not only as "*maestro di cappella*", but also for introducing "new" works from the symphonic and concerto repertoire to the general public.

The origins of the Bugeja dynasty of musicians may be traced back to the end of the 18th century. Since then and for a long time afterwards, the Bugeja family together with that of the Nani's dominated the musical scene in Malta. A member of either one of these families could be found to occupy the post of "*maestro di cappella*" in practically every church in Malta. Typical of the Maltese mentality, we soon find rival groups of supporters forming round the two families and enthusiasm on the part of these "clans" was at times known to get slightly out of hand.

Pietro Paolo Bugeja (1772-1828) was the first in the long line of composers which spanned almost two centuries. V. Caruana dei Conti Gatto in his *Malta Artistica Illustrata* says that Pietro Paolo probably began his studies with Francesco Azopardi. Like so many others before him the young Bugeja left Malta to continued studying in Naples when he was 19.

His first encounter with the music public of this city was when he composed a Solemn Mass in honour of San Ivo. This success led to his being appointed "*maestro di cappella*" at the Church of San Ivo in Naples, a place he occupied for about four years.

While he was in Naples, Pietro Paolo got to know his compatriot Nicolo Isouard, whom he greatly admired. After the success that Isouard had with his *L'Avviso ai Maritati*, he seems to have

become interested in composing an operatic work, a project which however never came to fruition.

After six years in Naples, Bugeja returned to Malta in 1797 and soon became very active in several "*cappellas*". His fame as a composer grew wider especially when he also started to involve himself in conducting. In fact, during the season 1806/1807, Bugeja held the post of musical director at the "Teatro Reale", the name by which the Manoel Theatre was called at the time. We find him occupying this post again during the 1812/1813 and 1815/1816 seasons. It is interesting to mention here that Angelo Nani, the first generation of the Nani dynasty, served as Bugeja's first violinist for most of these times.

Meanwhile, when Francesco Azopardi died in 1809, Pietro Paolo was appointed "*maestro di cappella*" at St John's. His sacred opus includes four *Messe da Requiem*, a *Messa di Gloria*, twenty shorter masses, about thirty psalms, various hymns, antiphons and responses. There are also nine symphonies.

Another secular work of his, the musical allegory *Il Primo Omaggio* (text by Cesare Vassallo) was composed and performed at the Teatro Reale for the welcome ceremonies for the new governor of Malta Sir Francis Hastings in 1824. His sacred oratorio *Gioas, Re di Giuda* (text by Pietro Anastasio) is also worthy of mention.

On the whole, Bugeja's worthiest contribution was his work in sacred music. His secular works, especially his symphonies, are rather simplistic in conception, form and orchestration.

Pietro Paolo had several children, two of whom Vincenzo and Filippo were to carry on the family standard. Vincenzo Bugeja was born in Valletta in 1805 and died in 1860. At the early age of 23, he found himself being asked to replace his father as "*maestro di cappella*" at St John's following the latter's death in 1828, a post he seems to have reluctantly accepted.

In fact, the year after he left for Naples. At the "*Conservatorio San Pietro di*

Maiella”, Vincenzo studied under Furno and Zingarelli, and his fellow students included the famous Mercadante and Bellini. Mifsud Bonnici writes that when Zingarelli was asked by King Vittorio Emanuele II to nominate two of his best students in order that they could be commissioned to compose a theatrical work he put forward the names of Vincenzo Bellini and Vincenzo Bugeja. The opera *Lodoviska* is said to have been Bugeja’s effort which he finished in 1831. Its Maltese premiere took place a year later at the Teatro Reale on the 15th March 1832.

On his return to Malta he took over the post of musical director to the numerous churches where his father Pietro Paolo had established himself. Vincenzo was especially popular in the parish church of Floriana where his antiphon *O Melitae Digna Proles* in honour of St Publius is still played to the present day. His work also includes solemn masses, funeral masses, motets, antiphons and six symphonies.

As already mentioned, Filippo (1808-1891) was Vincenzo’s younger brother. Unlike his brother and his father before him, Filippo did not go abroad to study. His only musical training was received from his father. Although he seems to have left his mark locally as a pianist, organist and music director, Filippo is perhaps the least important of the Bugeja line of musicians. His life is also rather obscure and few facts about his activities are known with certainty. Unlike the other Bugeja’s who left a very rich patrimony for posterity, Filippo’s works were either lost or else he was not a very assiduous composer. Granted that he probably wrote more than there is evidence for, yet his extant works are only a handful.

The onus of carrying on the musical torch of the Bugeja family fell on Riccardo, Filippo’s nephew. Riccardo Bugeja was the eldest son of Vincenzo. He was born in 1844 and died in 1926 at the venerable age of 82. In 1862 Riccardo

followed his father’s footsteps to the conservatorio San Pietro di Maiella in Naples. One of his teachers was the famous Mercadante with whom Riccardo seems to have forged a strong bond of friendship. Mifsud Bonnici in his *Mużiċisti, Kompożituri Maltin u Għawdxin* says that when Mercadante went totally blind Riccardo on various occasions served as his amanuensis. The author singles out Mercadante’s symphony *Il Rammonto del Bardo* also saying that it was dedicated to Riccardo. Like his father Vincenzo, Riccardo was quite a prolific composer. His symphonic overture *Cordelia* written in 1880 remains one of his more popular pieces to this day.

The coming into force of the “moto proprio” decreed by Pope Pius X in 1903 came as a blow to most composers versed and saturated as they were in the traditions of Neapolitan operatic-imbued sacred music. The moto proprio sought to abolish from regular church services excesses of operatic style singing and writing which by the end of the 19th century had permeated every nook and corner of church music-making. It aimed at reinstating as much as possible a simpler accessible style, opting for the simpler forms of the mystic tradition of the Gregorian chant, whenever possible, for the liturgical functions.

Riccardo was one of those composers who had to adapt themselves to the new laws of composition for sacred music, but unlike most of his colleagues he seems to have adapted himself without much difficulty to the recently imposed parameters.

With Riccardo’s son Vincent (1910-1967) we come to the end of the Bugeja dynasty. Vincent started his musical studies with several Maltese teachers but when he decided that it was time for him to go and specialize abroad, unlike his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he went to Rome not to Naples. He was 17 by that time and he successfully sat for an entrance examination at the *Istituto di Musica Sacra* where he studied with Refice, amongst others. He returned in 1934

and soon took up the post of musical director in several churches in true respect for a long standing family tradition.

The departures of the Italian opera company in 1939 just before the war broke out, provided the young Vincenzo with the opportunity to break into new ground. He formed the Malta Amateur Theatrical Company (notice the changing Maltese mentality reflected in the choice of an English rather than an Italian title, something which a few years before would have been taken for granted) to help fill the void created by the departure of the Italian singers and musicians. As musical director he performed many (admittedly Italian) operas but always with a totally Maltese cast.

The other family, minor in regards to the Nanis and the Bugeja's both as regards the number of creative members and span of activity, was that of the Vella's. It was started by Dr Giuseppe Vella who was born in Valletta in 1827, by which time both the Nani and Bugeja families had been active for more than 50 years. In Malta Giuseppe Vella had been the pupil of Don Giuseppe Scicluna before proceeding to Genova to specialize.

He was appointed "*maestro di cappella*" to the Cathedral and Co-Cathedral in 1861 after the death of Vincenzo Bugeja. He was also professor of music in the Jesuit College. Giuseppe Vella was quite a popular composer and his works seem to have had an immediate appeal on his listeners. During his time, he was mostly known and lauded for his *Requiem Mass*. He died in 1912. All three of his sons, namely Alberto (1866-1931), Luigi (1868-1950) and Paolo (1873-1948) were also composers, mostly of music of a lighter vein. Several of their pieces were published. However, their stamp on local music is very lightly marked and their importance is more historical than artistic.

Having drawn a historical line down the path of Malta's three best known musical dynasties right through the 19th century

and well in the 20th century, one can retrace one's steps back to the early 1800 to pick up the thread with regards to other composers contemporary to the Nani's, the Bugeja's and the Vella's.

With Alessandro Curmi (born in Valletta 1801) we come across a composer whose stature in our national musical heritage is not as yet given its due recognition. A cosmopolitan man by nature, Curmi worked in the main cities of Europe performing his works and operas. P.P. Castagna lists amongst others his *Gustavo d'Orxa* produced in Rome, the *Elodia d'Herstall* produced in Naples, *Il Proscritto di Messina* and *La Rivoluzione* both produced in Paris. Mention is also made of three operas which Curmi presented in London namely *La Rosiere*, *La Lolodich* and *La Reine de Fate*. These operas, with a French text, are very much in the style of the opera comique, a fact which would put him in line with his compatriot and predecessor Nicolò Isouard. Alessandro Curmi died in Naples in 1857.

An equally unresearched and as yet obscure figure is that of Francesco Schira (probably a foreign corruption of the local name Sciriha). Grove's Dictionary of Music quotes his date of birth as being 1809 in Malta, and that of his death, 1883, in London. Schira was a composer and conductor of a truly international fame.

When only nine years old he was already studying at the Conservatorio in Milan, and he received his first artistic commission at the young age of 17. This was an opera by the name *Elena e Malvino* performed on the 17th of November 1832 at the Teatro alla Scala. The immense success of this production earned Schira an immediate invitation to the Teatro Santo Carlos in Lisbon. In this city, Francesco sojourned for eight long years as the theatre's artistic director, conductor of the orchestra and also resident composer. He shared all these with the post of professor of harmony and counterpoint at the Lisbon Conservatoire. In 1842, Schira left Lisbon for Paris. His stay here was short-lived because he soon

had to leave for London after signing a contract as Musical Director for the Princess Theatre. A short time later he also had under his wings the artistic direction of the Drury Lane Theatre. Schira's expected appointment with Covent Garden arrived in 1848 with his opera *Kenilworth* based on Sir Walter Scott's story.

Other minor figures active during the first half of the 19th century were Emanuele Muscat (1790-1837) who studied in Naples; Emanuele Galea (1790-1850) reputedly active even in Russia where he is said to have written a hymn purposely for the Czar in 1842; Cesare Vassallo (1801-1880) also a doctor of laws and librarian; Angelo Galea (1806-1890), who served as bandmaster with several regimental English bands; and Don Giuseppe Scicluna (1809-1878).

From among this group of minor composers, Giuseppe Spiteri Fremond rises head and shoulders above all the others. Spiteri Fremond (1804-1878) was an Augustinian monk who gave his services in various monasteries belonging to his order in Rome, Genova, France the United Kingdom, Egypt and Palestine. His fame was such that the Musical Society of Bologna found him worthy to be nominated a member (1873) on the strength of the international recognition which his compositions had earned him.

During the span of seventy years starting from the middle of the 19th century, Mons. Giuseppe Farrugia was perhaps Gozo's most famous man of the arts. He was born on the 2nd of June 1852 and died on the 18th of March 1925 after a fruitful life spent in artistic ventures and scholarly pursuits. Farrugia, a canon at the Gozo Cathedral, was indeed a man of many talents. He was a first class preacher and Latinist, poet, author, architect and designer. He was also a very good musician, whose works, in their conception and treatment, were often ahead of what was being written contemporaneously in Malta.

The troubled times of the unification of

Italy resulted in a number of Jesuit priests settling in Gozo, and in a thrice, the Seminary in Victoria became a hub of diverse talents and excellent scholarship. One of these settlers, a certain Padre Enrico Scio, became Farrugia's teacher of music at the Seminary, and this would seem to explain how a student whose studies never over-stepped the narrow confines of Gozo, could at the same time write in a contemporary style, as fresh and modern as that of any of his colleagues from Malta. Farrugia wrote various masses, psalms, antiphons, hymns and a few secular works. He is best known for the music which is played during the feast of St George in Victoria.

The most prominent personality after the 1850's was undoubtedly Paolino Vassallo (1856-1913). He was only 19 years old when he went to Paris to study at the Conservatoire and, as teachers, had none other than Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet and Camille Saint-Saens. Vassallo made a name for himself in this city with the composition of diverse cantatas and symphonic pieces. He was also musical director of the then famous *Lamoureux Orchestra*.

It is said that Vassallo was even awarded the highly prestigious *Grand Prix de Rome*, a scholarship he could not accept because of his nationality.

In the course of the history of music in Malta, Vassallo represents the first composer who truly severed the close ties which Maltese music had always had with Italian forms and structures. In fact, his secular output is replete with compositions using formal structures which are basically extraneous to Italian idiom, like symphonies, symphonic poems and concert overtures. The harmonic language that Vassallo uses is also quite advanced.

In Malta, Vassallo established a school of music in his hometown Cospicua, and here, Carlo Diacono, Duminku Anastasi and Josie Mallia Pulverenti got their first training.

Paolino Vassallo's historical importance

is three pronged, namely, the influence he had on traditional Italian operatic practices in Malta, the reformed sacred style of the *Moto Proprio* of which he was a great promulgator, and thirdly modern harmonic and formal conceptions which he "imported" from the French School. It is interesting to note that the three students of his just mentioned, Diacono, Anastasi and Mallia Pulverenti each respectively represent these three aspects.

From the point of view of Maltese music, the third branch of influence just mentioned is the most important, because for the first time we can witness a radical break from three centuries of continuous Italian influence. During the middle of the 18th century, Paris was the centre of new artistic ideals which had been given birth and nurtured by such iconoclasts like Monet, Manet, Renoir, Degas and Cezanne. These artists had rebelled against the rules of Romantic art and started the so-called Impressionist Movement. These ideals reflected themselves in the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and later in that of Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Paolino Vassallo who lived and worked for a whole decade in Paris starting from 1875 till 1885 must surely have been in some way influenced by these artistic convulsions. Any man of his sensibility could not be immune to them.

The "French connection" of Maltese music could make an interesting study on its own. We have seen how musicians from Malta and their art had followed closely Italian (mostly Neapolitan) ideals. Yet, if one delves as far back as the middle of the 17th century one can find a secondary, far less delineated, yet almost uninterrupted line of influence originating from Paris. This had started with Luigi Mataron and Enrico Magi and then on to Mikiel Ang Vella, Francesco Azopardi, Nicolò Isouard, Alessandro Curmi (or the Francocized form Curmy as he himself mostly signed his name), Francesco Schira and last Paolino Vassallo.

A contemporary of Paolino Vassallo

worthy of mention is undoubtedly Emanuele Bartoli (1852-1933). For a long time he served as a bandmaster in the army and because of this position he has left a great number of original pieces for band and very good arrangements of operas, symphonies and other orchestral works also for this medium. However, he was no less active in the orchestral field. His opera *Simonetta* unfortunately never had an airing, but smaller works of his, especially religious pieces, were widely played. His compositions are notable for their rich harmonic basis, something which Bartoli often integrates with his melodic progressions in such a way as to make the two an essential part of each other.

Vassallo's students, Carlo Diacono (1876-1942), Fr Duminku Anastasi (1886-1938) and Jose Mallia Pulverenti (1896-1964) are the three mainstays of the music of the early decades of the 20th century. Their chief contribution and inclinations as far as Maltese music is concerned has already been hinted at. Of the three, Diacono was perhaps the one to follow most closely the traditional Italian school. Anastasi's art is, in a way, more refined and detached, with elements of a mystic nature surfacing through, especially in his "*a cappella*" works. Both Diacono and Anastasi make liberal use of modal tonalities in their works. Mallia Pulverenti, on the other hand, is the composer with the more "advanced" ideas and idioms. His two symphonic poems *Impressione Sinfonica* and *Espressionismo* attest clearly to this.

Yet, when everything is said, no doubt remains that the influence of Italian music, opera especially, had rooted itself deeply right through to the present time. The building of the Royal Opera House in 1866 was exactly the fruition of this widespread activity and its unquestioned popularity with the Maltese masses. Ulderico Rolandi makes some very interesting and elucidatory comments about opera in Malta in the mid-1850's. He writes that:

“successful appearances on the Maltese operatic stage was considered as an indispensable step in the career of any fledgling artiste”

(he was obviously referring to Italian artistes) and continues saying that:

“the Maltese public were always very enamoured of the lyrical theatre. They showed respect and good manners by refraining from cross talking and making noises with the programmes during the performances, and not coming late”

(apparently ill affecting Italian contemporary theatres).

The above shows the respect that the Italians themselves had for operatic presentation in Malta and how highly they thought of the Maltese stage as a centre for opera production. Moreover, if one looks at the list of operas that were presented during the first operatic season at the Royal Opera House (and most successive ones for that matter) it is not difficult to imagine why.

The first Commission for the Royal Opera House appointed by the government consisted of Lieutenant Colonel John Reel, Mr Henry C. Frendo and Baron Ugo Testaferrata Abela and for the very first season (1866) they programmed the following 16 operas: *I Puritani* (Bellini), *Gemma di Vergy* (Donizzetti), *L'Ebreo* (Appollone), *Mirope* (Pacini), *Jone* (Petrella), *Ernani* (Verdi), *Barbiere di Siviglia* (Rossini), *Crispino e la Comare* (Ricci), *Lucrezia Borgia* (Donizzetti), *Roberto il Diavolo* (Meyerbeer – notice straightaway and significantly, the Italianized version of the French original *Robert Le Diable*), *Elisir D'Amor* (Donizzetti), *Rigoletto* (Verdi), *Poliuto* (Donizzetti), *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) and *La Traviata* (Verdi).

The average number of operas presented for each season was fifteen, two of which had to be new to Malta. In all, during a particular season, more than 120 performances were presented, and considering the size of these islands, operatic life then could be considered very rich indeed.

The main bulk of the operas presented were Italian with a sprinkling of French

ones, though always in their Italian version. The following French operas (with the dates of their Maltese premiere) cropped up regularly on the “cartellone” of the Royal Opera House – *Faust* (1868) by Gounod, *Fra Diavolo* (1872) and *La Muta dei Portici* (1866) by Auber, *Roberto il Diavolo* (1866), *Gli Ugonotti* (1868), *L'Africana* (1870), *Il Profeta* (1872) and *Dinorah* (1873) by Meyerbeer, *L'Ebreo* (1876) by Halevy and *Carmen* (1880) by Bizet.

German opera was practically non-existent with the exception of *Martha* (1862) by Flotow and *Don Giovanni* (1847) by Mozart. The first Wagnerian operatic drama, *Lohengrin* arrived during the season 1895-1896.

Reference has already been made to the Nani, Bugeja and the Vella families, some of whose members were extremely active as “*maestri di cappella*” during the first half of the 20th century. However there were quite a few other musicians worthy of mention, active not only in churches but also in the theatre and the very popular local bands – composers like Carlo Farrugia (1881-1961) who studied with Giuseppe Vella; Gaetano Grech (1855-1933) author of a book on the rules of harmony in Maltese; Mario Cirillo (1891-1955) who studied in Naples and Joseph Abdilla (1886-1944) a student of Paolino Vassallo and a well-known contrapuntist.

Another student of Paolino Vassallo was Giuseppe Caruana (1880-1931). Caruana wrote a lot of sacred music but is nowadays chiefly remembered for his hymns. Caruana had a natural flair for writing these simple, attractive semi-religious tunes which over the years seem to have lost nothing of their original freshness and impact. They have a beauty of line rarely met with in Maltese music. I always think of Giuseppe Caruana as the “Schubert” of Maltese music.

Giuseppe Camilleri (1903-1976) and Joseph Abela Scolaro (1910-1979) were both active in the world of the theatre. Camilleri, especially, was for a long time

musical director of a local amateur operatic company with whom he produced several operas. Both Camilleri and Abela Scolaro were also very well-known conductors of popular bands and have written some of the best pieces in the “local” repertoire for this medium.

As regards the contemporary scene, four composers stand out clearly both for their vast and varied output and their recognition on an international level – Carmelo Pace (born 1906), Charles Camilleri (born 1931), Pawlu Grech (born 1938), and Joseph Vella (born 1942) who is also very active as a conductor.

Carmelo Pace (1906-1993) has been a shining light to most of his contemporaries.

Whether one finds empathy with his music, or faults some of his styles and approaches, his figure none the less looms prominently as that of the “grand old man” of Maltese Music during the greater part of the 20th century. He wrote prolifically in the field of opera, oratorio, chamber music and orchestral works, a substantial number of which have received performances abroad. Pace was the first composer to take an active interest in Maltese folk music. In fact his orchestral *Fantasia Maltesina* was first played in 1931. He also left his mark in the field of teaching, an activity which he assiduously followed right up to his death.

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